Great Blue Herons in Seattle

Ardea herodias

Common, year-round resident

Photo courtesy of Seattle Audubon

The familiar Great Blue Heron is the largest heron in North America. It is a large bird, with a slate-gray body, chestnut and black accents, and very long legs and neck. In flight, it looks enormous, with a six-foot wingspan, and typically holds its head in toward its body with its neck bent.

Habitat:
Great Blue Herons inhabit sheltered, shallow bays and inlets, sloughs, marshes, wet meadows, shores of lakes, and rivers. Nesting colonies are typically found in mature forests, on islands or near mudflats, and do best when they are free of human disturbance and have foraging areas close by.

Where to find Great Blue Herons in Seattle:
Seattle is currently home to about 100 nesting Great Blue Herons, with more coming in to forage from nearby colonies. They can be seen in almost every neighborhood, near water or flying overhead.

There are currently only two known nesting colonies of herons within the Seattle city limits: Kiwanis Ravine near Discovery Park (36 active nests last year) and a much smaller colony at North Beach (just east of Golden Gardens Park). A large colony on the West Duwamish Greenbelt was abandoned in 1999 and the herons have not returned there for nesting. The largest nesting colony in the region resides in Renton's Black River Riparian Forest, just south of the Seattle city limits, and these are likely the herons frequently seen in south Seattle.

A large citizen monitoring project, involving hundreds of volunteers camped out in lawn chairs with binoculars, has been conducted on Seattle herons since 1999. It is called the "Great Blue Heron Sit."

Behavior:
Great Blue Herons are often seen flying high overhead with slow wing-beats. When foraging, they stand silently along riverbanks, lake shores or in wet meadows, waiting for prey to come by, which they then strike with their bills. They will also stalk prey slowly and deliberately. Predominantly day hunters, they may also be active at night.

Diet:
The variable diet of our Great Blue Herons includes fish, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, small mammals and even other birds. Steelhead smolts are a favorite, and Norway Rats have been found in the guts of Seattle herons.

Nesting:
Great Blue Herons usually breed in colonies containing a few to several hundred pairs. Isolated pair-breeding is rare. Nest building begins in February when a male chooses a nesting territory and displays to attract a female. The nest is usually situated high up in a tree. Both parents incubate the 3-5 eggs for 25-29 days. Both parents regurgitate food for the young. The young can first fly at about 60 days old, although they continue to return to the nest and are fed by the adults for another few weeks. Pair bonds only last for the nesting season, and adults form new bonds each year.

Conservation Status:
Although Great Blue Herons are currently common and widespread, disturbance during the breeding season may result in nest failure or colony abandonment. In April of 1999, 40 percent of the Seattle-area heron colonies were abandoned mid-season. This may have been a human disturbance or, as recently observed in the Seattle area, may have been caused by other birds. Bald Eagles, becoming more common with increasingly less habitat, have taken to harassing Great Blue Herons on their colonies and feeding on the chicks. Adding to the impact, crows now wait on the sidelines and swoop in to take the remaining eggs once the eagles finish their meals. Noise also is a disturbance to nesting colonies, and a 1000-foot buffer zone around colonies is recommended. One change that has been noticed in Washington in recent years is that colonies that once numbered 100-200 nests are breaking up into smaller groups with 30-40 nests each.

Regulatory Protection of Herons:
Herons are protected from shooting, and their nesting sites are protected under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. As a Priority Species identified by Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, herons are included in the development of local Comprehensive Plans under the Growth Management Act. Priority species require protective measures for their perpetuation due to their population status, sensitivity to habitat alteration, and/or recreational, commercial or tribal importance.